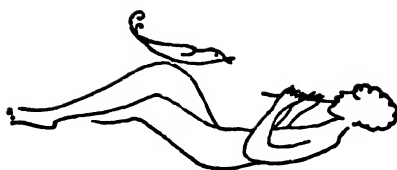




MACHMADIM ART EDITION

Ernst Josephson

by Simon L. Millner



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DURING the latter half of the nineteenth century, nearly all of Europe was rocked by a collision of powerful and opposing ideologies of art, morality and politics. It was a unique period in history because of the fact that the perennial differences between conservatives and revolutionaries had become so exaggerated that no fruitful resolution was possible and great damage was inflicted on society by an abnormal intensification of the process that usually ensures its health. With a large part of this history the artistically educated public is familiar. The long line of revolt against the conservatives which began with the impressionists and continued on through post-impressionism, cubism, surrealism and the advanced schools of present-day painting has by now gained considerable understanding and been given, very nearly, its due place in even conservative textbooks.

Yet much of our knowledge is incomplete and our judgment of the men and accomplishments of this period is still distorted by our closeness to it and the fact that we have not yet absorbed its discoveries. If by now a sufficient battery of critical illumination enables us to measure, with some truth and sense of proportion, the accomplishments of painters like Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, and analogous figures in the other arts, we have neglected others who, perhaps solely because they were not as influential, or perhaps because they led their lives further from the greatest centers of political and cultural power, are even slower to receive the acclaim they deserve. As a result, of course, the critical delay makes the task of estimating them doubly difficult, since, in order to make a place for them, those who have at last gained acceptance must once more be displaced

slightly and our knowledge and judgment of the period ordered afresh.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Sweden produced two great men of similar temperament, blending such dissonant elements as a realistic, revolutionary devotion to society and life, and a fervent, poetic mysticism in a characteristically Northern fashion—August Strindberg, and the painter, Ernst Abraham Josephson. The name of Strindberg is, perhaps, as widely known to the cultured of all countries as that of any writer in the nineteenth century—the understanding of his ideas, however, lags considerably behind his fame. The name of Josephson, belying the adage, is legendary in his own country and scarcely known elsewhere—though this is clearly the result of accident rather than a gauge of his value.

Nearly all the great artists of the nineteenth century underwent untold sufferings because of their isolation from a community and the backwardness of society but usually received belated, and, sometimes, posthumous tributes from the world at large. Usually, too, they found sympathy and understanding from friends. Less than any, did Josephson receive during his lifetime, the acclaim so necessary to an artist's well-being, and, very much like Van Gogh, the combination of others' neglect and his own stubborn integrity, affected his sanity in his later years. The neglect of the Dutch genius has been remedied in part, because his development has been more intimately linked to major trends in modern art. The Swedish artist, who consistently returned to his place in the life into which he was born, and spent so much of his energy making common cause with the artists of his own nation, has suffered precisely because of his most outstanding qualities: a stubborn dedication to oppressive realities, and the problems most close to him.

Ernst Abraham Josephson was born in Stockholm on April 16, 1851, in a middle-class Jewish family of marked refinement and culture. The great-grandfather of Ernst, David Josephson, a teacher of religion, migrated to Sweden from Germany, when, during the reign of Gustav III, the Swedish Riksdag passed a law proclaiming unhampered freedom of religion in the nation. Although for generations, the Josephsons main-

tained themselves in business, the family had a long heritage of assiduous devotion to the arts and culture. It was a family in which Ernst's manifest talents were certain of appreciation and encouragement. It was, perhaps, somewhat too favorable an environment for artistic development; one that tended to weaken the artist as an individual. For the peculiarly insulated, narcissistic and self-sufficient household of the Josephsons was one in which the outside world entered only in a muted and distorted fashion. Its sensitized, affectionate atmosphere prepared Ernst but poorly for the shock of encountering a world in which hostility, competition and indifference were the rule rather than the exception.

When Ernst was ten years old, his father died. While this event might have been crippling to a sensitive child, its effect was mitigated by the attentions of an uncle who assumed some of the paternal functions. Ludvig Josephson was the youngest brother of Ernst's father and had achieved great prominence in the theater as a playwright, actor, producer and director. The mutual understanding that sprung up between Ernst and his talented uncle soon changed the nature of their relationship and overcame the disparity in age. For not only were they bound by similar tastes, but a rare kinship of spirit. They were both of a passionate, rebellious disposition and quick to perceive these qualities in each other. Their relationship was harmonious, sympathetic, and profoundly beneficial to Ernst until Ludvig's death in 1899.

Another uncle, who had a great influence on Ernst's life and compensated him somewhat for the early loss of his father, was Jakob Josephson, the musical member of this multi-faceted family. A conductor of the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, musical director of the University of Upsala, he presided over a modest salon frequented by the elite in all the arts. In his home, Ernst was fortunate enough to encounter not only Swedish artists but visiting foreign notables who helped to broaden an outlook that might have become narrow and parochial. They instilled in him an acute and enduring sense of the vast movements and shifts in the world of art and their significance. The religious side of Ernst's nature was also profoundly af-

fectured by this uncle. After a lengthy period of soul-searching and self-questioning, Jakob Josephson had been converted to Christianity. Throughout his life Ernst sought to satisfy the powerful religious urge that was a family trait, in a manner that transcended Jewish or Christian doctrine, by a faith in God above the differences in theology.

Like other artists, Ernst had great difficulty executing the tasks imposed on him by formal education. At the age of fifteen, he terminated his academic studies but only to embark on an equally tedious and fruitless course—an apprenticeship in a business concern. Within a year, his family recognized Ernst's obvious disinclination for business and gave him permission to enter, for good or ill, upon the career of an artist. In 1868, as a result of this decision, we find Ernst enrolled in the "Principle of the Academy of Free Arts", as the elementary class was resoundingly named by the authorities. For three terms Ernst received some training in the fundamentals of art and learned to submit with some patience to discipline and authority. It was, of course, inordinately difficult for so robust and spirited a youth as Ernst to bear with equanimity the narrow and ill-conceived curriculum ordained for the fledglings of the Academy. So constricting was this program that even among the elementary students, a constant stir of opposition and discontent prevailed. Ernst stifled whatever impatience and resentment he may have felt and, after three terms, was admitted into the "Lower Antiquity".

The crowded years Ernst spent at the Academy, slowly groping his way through the thickets of art, were not marked by any startling revelations of genius or precocious flashes of personal brilliance, but rather by painstaking effort, extreme patience and a persistent concentration on the most difficult problems. His early drawings and paintings show hardly a trace of a glib pencil or brush, and little fluency. What is original and unique about his early work is not at all the brilliance of an adolescent display of personality but an almost premature sincerity, severity of judgment and courage in undertaking difficult and necessary tasks even at the risk of failure. The qualities that are salient in his best work were already in evi-

dence—the austerity, the freedom from mannerism, the profound seriousness and unremitting intensity of concentration. From the first it is plain that Josephson was an artist who would not veer one degree from his natural direction for the sake of popular taste and opinion or turn aside from the tasks that faced him through self-indulgence, or desire for a quick success.

In the Academy, among the senior students, two groups had formed which engaged in youthful controversy as heated as it was apt to be misguided. One professed to follow the principles of the Italian High Renaissance and was designated “the Idealists”; the other sailed under the banners of Rembrandt and Holbein and was styled “the Realists”. Although his sympathies were with the latter group, Ernst refused to cast his lot with either of the contending parties. When questioned, he frequently called himself “the Colorist”.

The instruction in the upper classes of the Academy was as hidebound and narrowly formal as in the lower. A select few of the youthful scholars, who chafed under the reactionary restrictions imposed upon them by the Academicians, banded together in a zestful, enterprising coterie, and developed studies and researches independent of the “Higher Antiquity”. With this group of restive, inquiring artists who soon became associated with youthful rebels in other fields of endeavor, Ernst Josephson made common cause. This group did not consist merely of Bohemians who wished to fling aside convention or enjoy themselves without purpose. High-minded, explosive and articulate, they left an ineradicable deposit in the Swedish consciousness that bore fruit in literature, music, art and in the national social and moral ideology.

In the novel “The Red Room”, August Strindberg gives a glowing characterization of this remarkable group of intellectuals, artists and lovers of liberty. In Strindberg’s masterful delineation of one of the most influential and effective intellectual groups of the period, there is unfortunately no portrait of Ernst Josephson. However we may gain some insight, second-hand, into Josephson’s life at this time. Two of his closest and staunchest friends are vividly portrayed therein. One of them,

a former farmhand, Jonsson, has the role of a major protagonist in the book. Jonsson was one of those rare souls who inspire a fervent allegiance in some people by a combination of the utmost simplicity, exaltation and earnest moral purpose. He was bound to have an effect on Ernst, who could react immediately and most recklessly to precisely these qualities. This is what Ernst wrote of Jonsson at that time: "He is repulsively ugly, neglected and indigent in appearance, without any apparent talents, extremely poor and without friends. But if you should run across this man, treat him with respect because he deserves it. His is a gigantic soul, far from faultless, but always suffering and depressed over mankind. He taught me to think, and convinced me of the existence of the soul. I am his only friend."

In the midst of this ferment of ideas and experiences, Josephson maintained his steady if slow progress in mastering the principles and techniques of his profession. In the summer of 1872, he packed his gear and made a trip to Norway that was to have much significance for his painting in the fulness of his later days. At that time he seemed merely enchanted by the serene beauty of the Norwegian fields and rivers, but an unconscious process had been set in motion that would yield itself to expression only years later when it had developed to its limit. That curious faculty of imagination which works in silence, unbidden and unheralded, had begun to form for Josephson the complex symbolism that achieved its final elaboration in his magnificent water-sprite paintings. From his letters of the period, it is obvious that his fancy had already been struck by the symbol of the water sprite with its curious and touching references. In one place, it was conceived, as in ancient popular beliefs, as "the sign of nature" for the grief, anxiety and torment men had to endure. For the artist it was more than the symbol of the travail of man—for man endured merely an infliction from without while the artist suffered as well from within. In his tribute to Norway, in that memorable summer, Josephson does not utter these explicit sentiments. They are reserved for his mature reflections. However, we may notice a gracious, pantheistic strain in his apostrophe to the beauty of the Norwegian scene. He writes: "Here is a home for the soul!

The fjords stretching their arms toward the skies are my brothers and the valleys with their refreshing and swift-flowing rivers are my sisters."

Upon his return from Norway, his imagination still charged and vibrant from his experience, Josephson plunged into arduous studies. The concentrated power of absorption which hitherto had been confined to the rudiments of technique, expanded into a penetrative study of nature and psychology. During the winter of 1868-1869, Josephson contented himself with scrupulously modest endeavors in his art, as if by an exercise of the will. A series of family portraits from this period are done in profile as if they are the result of a carefully measured transition from his childhood habit of cutting paper silhouettes. The stamp of the apprentice is plainly evident in these portraits. But by the summer of 1872, his progress is such, at least in terms of professional aptitude, that he is able to sell a painting to the Art Society. To many young painters this would have constituted a heady draught, but Josephson's reaction is typically modest, almost demure. In a letter to his uncle, Ludvig Josephson, he writes: "It is strange how a formal recognition affects one's friends and acquaintances. I just smile sadly and feel that I am as far as ever from my great goal."

The pattern of Josephson's development differs markedly even from that of men who resembled him in their successful efforts to break through the conventionalized and static formulae of nineteenth century art. Most of the great pioneering artists of the period usually broke with tradition sharply at a fairly early stage in their development. Their later work is apt to be pure, highly specialized and individual to a fault, as if, in the necessity of breaking free from a tyrannic past, they had even managed to free themselves from some of the resistance so necessary to conserve the strength and significance of their work. In Josephson there is a never-failing and constant connection with the traditions of great European art through works that he idolized in his youth, and whose virtues he never ceased trying to graft into his own canvasses. If at times this feature of his sensibility tends to lesson his originality, it is compensated for in those compositions where he achieves a real originality coupled with a solidity and profundity rare in that period.

It is not surprising then, to find Josephson making a tour of the artistic capitals of Europe and devoting himself to the study of the masterpieces he saw, with unchecked zeal and admiration. In November of 1873, he left Stockholm with his friend Sverin Nilsson, to take up residence in Paris. They took a devious route, stopping wherever there were works of art that interested them, which meant, naturally, first at Copenhagen where they lingered to admire the Thorwaldsens. In Berlin they visited the Altes Museum, where Josephson was enraptured by the paintings of Murillo, whose warm palette and ardent sympathy for life touched him to the quick. Raphael too, moved him to admiration, although in later years he was to class him much below Rembrandt. From Berlin they made their way to Dresden, where they stayed to look at outstanding paintings of Rubens, Titian, Van Dyck, and, above all, Rembrandt. After Dresden they stopped at Weimar, Cassek and Dusseldorf, the last of which irked Josephson so that he described it as "a heap of artistic merchandise". At Cologne, Josephson was ecstatic over the cathedral, and in Brussels, rather unduly awed by the weird exhibitions of Wiertz, then very much in vogue.

Young as Josephson was, his experiences on this trip left a profound imprint on his character and work. As original and individual in expression as Josephson was later to become, he never lost touch with his predecessors and quite late in life he is to be found poring over the works of the painters he respected most highly.

His entry into Paris, was, given his temperament, bound to be an event of the first magnitude for him—for it was not only the Mecca of all the artists of the period, where the great painters could be seen and studied at close range, but a battleground of conflicting ideologies, human and intellectual interests. If his adjustment to Paris was made somewhat easier by the fact that a colony of Swedish painters was already firmly established there, it is true that his interests were somewhat split by his propensity for becoming deeply involved in the complex affairs of this group. He did settle down however, after the first flush of excitement, and attempted to become a pupil of the renowned Bonnat. Bonnat's studio, however, was overcrowded and Joseph-

son entered L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts to become a pupil of the noted Gerome, now chiefly remembered as the implacable enemy of Edouard Manet.

Whatever Gerome's shortcomings, Josephson was exhilarated by the relative freedom and enthusiasm he found at the Beaux-Arts. The mere absence of the absurd, obsolete restrictions of the Swedish Art Academy made him rejoice. And the feeling that the student was a mature, independent individual, capable of making decisions of his own, made him willing to overlook the faults of the school, at least temporarily. The sense of liberty and the informality of the surroundings made him exuberant and eager for study.

The contending creeds in the labyrinth of the Parisian art world, the riot of ideas, the innumerable schools, techniques, philosophies of art, caused Josephson to hesitate and tread warily during his relatively brief stay. He devoted himself more to study than production. His output of this period is remarkably scant—a few life sketches, some paintings on subjects and scenes of his native country, and lastly, a portrait of his comrade, Sverin Nilsson.

But reluctant as Josephson was to channel his efforts in any fixed direction, his sketches, particularly a large one of a female model, affords evidence of the influence of Courbet. The simplicity of the modelling, the emphasis on direct observation, the stress on values of sincerity and power indicate that the great realist's approach to painting was affecting Josephson most strongly, even if it was along lines, which in all probability, he would have taken of his own volition. It is for this reason, perhaps, that at this stage of his development, the new impressionist discoveries seem to have made no mark on him. The technique that he had acquired was becoming united with a perspective on life and society, a growing fusion of disparate aesthetic, emotional and intellectual values. Significantly, too, it is at this period that he was most deeply stirred by Rembrandt—whose art may be felt as a latent force, galvanizing so much of modern European painting—often most strongly present where it is superficially most absent. For it is, of course, not literal representationalism that is the essence of the realistic

genre, but a complex set of human and aesthetic values, some of which may be found crystallized in Rembrandt and in the other Dutch artists of his period.

Single-minded as the sensibility of Josephson appears at this period, it would be wise to move cautiously and take this characteristic as provisional. For with all artists, and particularly with one as meditative and free from dogma as Josephson, it is unwise to let a definition stand without serious reservations and modifications. In fact, Josephson's admiration for Courbet and his methods is neither exclusive nor unshakeable. In front of the paintings of Corot, lyrical, tranquil, with their unsurpassed delicacy of treatment, and those of Courbet with their unvarnished realism and rugged simplicity, Josephson stood largely confused as to which to accord the superiority. Corot's refined skill, the haunting charm of his landscapes, was not to be wholly vanquished in his mind by Courbet's grimly earnest confrontation of life and nature.

While Josephson found himself subject to various degrees of uncertainty as he submitted painfully to the attractions of conflicting approaches to his art, he was wholly capable of reaching positive conclusions and confident, definite judgments. In evaluating the merits of the rival schools of Germany and France, Josephson displayed an acute critical sense: "One hears so much about the drawing and composition of the Germans. After having been in Germany, and then spending some time in Paris, one will soon realize that there are no draughtsmen in the world like the French. And as for composition, the French method will undoubtedly be that of the future, while the German is merely boring."

In general, what Josephson brought back with him from his first trip to the capital of art, was a heightened sense of clashing values and an impetus, largely derived from Courbet and the new realism. He also brought back a deeper understanding of Rembrandt and an unlimited admiration for his work. He was impatient to fathom the mysteries of the Dutch giants, and eager to wrest whatever he could from a thoroughgoing concentration on Rembrandt's masterpieces.

The uncertainties, the struggles of an artist, are without sur-